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More Truth and Light

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More Truth and Light

Not many Englishmen knew about Robert Browne. Yet he was a Cambridge man and writer of books attacking Queen Elizabeth's doctrine of "supremacy" and "uniformity" in religion. In two of them, *A Treatise of Reformation without tarrying for any* and *A Book which Sheweth the life and manners of all true Christians*, he had "set out quite clearly the fundamental principles of Congregationalism." For this the Bishop of Norwich had him jailed. Browne fled England in 1581, but came back, re-entered the Anglican Church, preached, and died in 1633.

The hangings of Henry Barrowe and John Greenwood in 1593 — both Cambridge graduates — make a better landmark of nonconformity. They died for writing *A True Description out of the Word of God, of the Visible Church*, and for saying: "This church . . . consisteth of a companie and fellowship of faithful and holie people gathered in the name of Christ Iesus, their only King, Priest, and Prophet, worshipping him aright. . . ."

The "Barrowists" were more numerous than the "Brownists." There had been a few churches like this but the queen would not tolerate them.

Some of the queen's subjects — "Puritans" — were uppish about a "scriptural" way of church government, leaving bishops out. In 1603 Elizabeth was succeeded by James I. Greeted by the Puritans with a call to reform the Church, the king appointed a Bible commission, which issued the King James Version in 1611. But the Puritans continued to use the Geneva Bible, printed in 1560.

The Separatists, though having some Puritan sympathies, formed in knots by themselves. They cared less for the Church of England "purified" than for a church in agreement with Scripture and comprising only the elect. The king threatened: "I shall make them conform themselves, or I will harrie them out of the land, or else doe worse." But the Separatists went on forming churches, notably at Scrooby and Austerfield; William Brewster of the former and William Bradford of the latter are well known, as is their pastor, the Rev. John Robinson, a brilliant Cambridge graduate. But those who stole off to such meetings had to leave for Holland in 1608, and Robinson himself fled. In Leyden, his church counted 300 souls; Brewster, covertly printing Separatist books, was elected as the church elder.

The Leyden exiles obtained a patent for the "Northerne parts of Virginia" and signed an

agreement for ships and supplies. As Bradford wrote: "... but they knew they were pilgrimes. ... " Two ships were hired, and "all other things gott in readines." Edward Winslow wrote that Robinson "was very confident the Lord had more truth and light yet to breake forth out of his holy Word." After prayers, the *Speedwell* embarked from Leyden. At Southampton, "lying ready, with all the rest of their company," was the other ship, of 180 tons burden — the *Mayflower*. But she had to sail alone with her 102 passengers on September 6. Blown far off her course, she was brought off the point of Cape Cod, where in her cabin on November 11, 1620, the Mayflower Compact was signed by forty-one of the men.

THE MAYFLOWER COMPACT — 1620

In y^e name of god Amen. We whose names are underwritten,
the loyal subjects of our dread soveraigne Lord King James
by y^e grace of god, of great Britaine, France, & Ireland King
defendor of y^e faith, &c.
Having undertaken, for y^e glorie of god, and advancement
of y^e Christian, and honour of our king & countrey, a voyage to
plant y^e first Colonie in y^e Northern parts of Virginia. Do
by these presents solemnly & mutually in y^e presence of god, and
one of another, Covenant, & combine our selves together into a
Civill body politick, for y^e better ordering, & preservation & fur-
therance of y^e ends aforesaid; and by vertue hereof to enacte,
constitute, and frame such just & equall Lawes, ordinances,
Acts, constitutions, & offices, from time to time, as shall be thought
most meete & convenient for y^e generall good of y^e Colonie: unto
which we promise all due submission and obedience. In witness
whereof we have hereunder subscribed our names at Cape
Codd y^e 11. of November, in y^e year of y^e raigne of our soveraigne
Lord King James of England, France, & Ireland y^e eighteenth
and of Scotland y^e fiftie fourth, An^o Dom. 1620.]

William Bradford's Of Plimoth Plantation
(Courtesy of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts)

On going ashore on December 21 at Plymouth Rock, the Pilgrims erected a rude shelter and fort where they also had church. Had the Indians, who visited them in the spring, not been friendly, the colony might not have survived. Let Bradford tell:

But that which was most sadd & lamentable was, that in 2. or 3. moneths time halfe of their company dyed, espetially in Jan: & February, being ye depth of winter, and wanting houses & other comforts; being infected with ye scurvie & other diseases, which this long vioage & their inacomodate condition had brought upon them; so as ther dyed some times 2. or 3. of a day, in ye aforesaid time; that of 100. & odd persons, scarce 50. remained.

Yet, when the *Mayflower* left for England in April, the remnant stayed.

With summer, conditions improved, and there was a good harvest. "But it was ye Lord which upheld them. . . ," said Bradford, who, as the new governor, called on everybody to celebrate the first American Thanksgiving with venison and turkey. Elder Brewster led prayers, as the colony had no minister. John Alden and Priscilla Mullins were both there, as were Captain Myles Standish and many Indians.

These were the Congregational FOREFATHERS. Many churches keep the day — December 21 — to mark the progress of religious liberty.